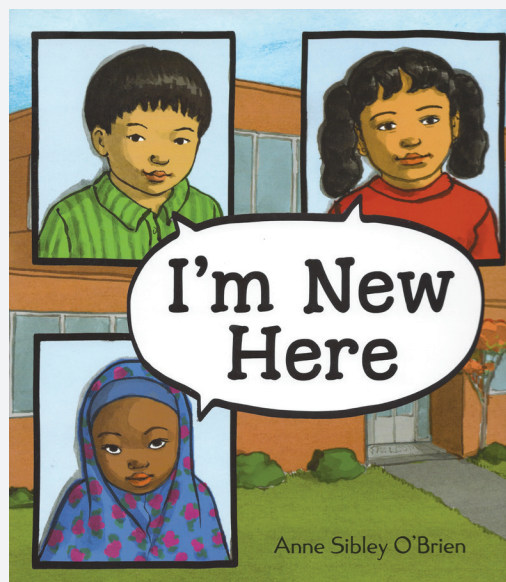


## Second Reaction: Please, Make Yourself at Home

O'Brien, Anne Sibley. *I'm New Here*. Watertown: Charlesbridge, 2015. Print.

*Michelle Pizzolato Blanchard*



"Wow! That's the best picture in the book!" This was the reaction of one of my first graders when we got to the picture of Jin composing a story from the images in his mind. The book, *I'm New Here*, written and illustrated by Anne Sibley O'Brien, was the springboard for a thoughtful discussion about feeling at home in a new place and meaningful extension activities.

I shared O'Brien's book with a small group of students who had been studying various genres. After the first few pages, they identified the text as realistic fiction. One student compared it to a classmate who had moved from another state and joined our class. It was a good comparison, as they began to think about the many differences of moving from another country. They were immediately interested in the characters' native countries, so I read from the inside sleeve of the book. It presented an excellent link to geography as we located each country on the map.

Once each of the three characters had been highlighted, I paused to ask the students how they might be feeling:

"I bet they're confused because they can't understand what everyone is saying."

"It's probably scary for them because they don't know anybody."

"I think they're wondering if they're going to make friends."

All of the reactions were genuine. The children could relate to the characters; they talked about times they tried something for the first time. As the characters worked through the challenges of fitting in, attempting new language, and communicating their thoughts, the children were engaged in the story. Because the activities portrayed in the book are so common, the children were able to identify with the characters.

"Anyone can play soccer, even if she [Maria] speaks a different language."

"Her [Fatimah's] artwork is really good. I think she could teach her new friends to be artists."

"He [Jin] can write about anything he wants. That picture of everything in his imagination is awesome!"

"Yes, and even if he makes mistakes when he's writing, it's OK. We all make mistakes."

After the story, I chose to read the information about the author on the inside sleeve. They all seemed to have the same "ah-ha" moment, when one student said, "So it happened to her and that inspired her to write the story."

The book naturally lends itself to having the children share ways they can help new international friends feel welcome. To extend the lesson, I offered the opportunity to write letters to the author to share ideas for welcoming students to our classroom/school if they moved from another country. The students were eager to begin their work on this assignment.

A second reading of the book allows the teacher to focus on the author's beautiful use of similes as model text for a writing lesson. Her choice of words such as, "Our voices flowed like water and flew between us like birds" and "The words opened like windows and doors into a story" makes the book pleasant to read aloud (unpaged). Additionally, the children were very interested in the way the author spelled words phonetically, yet incorrectly, on the page that describes how the sounds of the new words are strange to the ears. This could create an opportunity for word discrimination with basic sight words when presented in conventional and phonetic form. The way in which the text was presented (in speech bubbles) unexpectedly engaged the children.

Based on the reactions of these first graders, *I'm New Here* can be shared with younger and older children alike. There are many directions the teacher can take in extending the lesson for meaningful instruction. The powerful message delivered in this simple story can be appreciated and enjoyed in many classroom settings.

## **About the Author**

**Michelle Pizzolato Blanchard**, a National Board Certified Teacher (NBCT), is a lifelong resident of Louisiana. Her degrees include a bachelor's in elementary education, a master's in reading education (both from Nicholls State University), and the certificate of Education Specialist in curriculum and instruction from Louisiana State University (LSU). As a first grade teacher for twenty-two years, Blanchard was employed by Ascension Parish Schools from 1994 to 2006. She then joined the faculty of LSU Laboratory School and has been there for ten years. She is passionate not only about working with first graders, but also about working with student teachers and creating workshops for cross-curricular lessons at the local, state, and national levels through professional conferences.